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Emojis as a cash cow: Biaoqingbao-hatched economic practice in online China

by

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Emojis as a cash cow: Biaoqingbao-hatched economic practice in online China

Abstract

On Chinese social media, Biaoqing (the Chinese version of emojis) and Biaoqingbao (the Chinese version of emoji packages) are much more versatile and influential than the emojis on western social media. In this paper, two popular Biaoqingbao figures, Eggy and Budding Pop, are followed. The results indicate that Biaoqing are not simply semiotic resources for online communication, they also represent the taste and micro-hegemonic identity of their users. What is more, the cute/*méng* (萌) characteristic of Biaoqing can be a strong dynamo for the formation of light communities. In such light communities, members perform various Biaoqingbao-initiated economic activities, including rewarding designers and buying Biaoqingbao-related merchandise, which are typical of the 21st century online culture.

Keywords: Chinese social media, Biaoqing, Biaoqingbao, *méng* culture, economic practice, taste, light community

Introduction

Emojis are omnipresent on various social media. In the case of Chinese social media, emojis are far more versatile than the yellow-face icons such as these: 😊 😌 😭 😊. On Chinese social media, emojis also include emoticons, image macros, GIFs, which are collectively named Biaoqing (表情, literally: facial expression). On many social media forums, Biaoqing featuring a certain figure came in packages, i.e. Biaoqingbao (表情包, literally: facial expression package). In this research, Biaoqing and Biaoqingbao will be used in the description of emoji phenomena on Chinese social media, and in agreement with the tradition of the Chinese language, the singular and plural forms of the two terms (Biaoqing and Biaoqingbao) will not be differentiated.

Some Biaoqingbao are so popular that the figures in them even become idols for netizens. Once new Biaoqingbao are published in the Sticker Gallery on WeChat,¹ they are warmly applauded



¹ WeChat is a Chinese social media app developed by Tencent, a Chinese internet company, and released in 2011. The multiple features of WeChat win it the fame as China's "app for everything", which includes instant messaging, commerce and payment services, timeline/updates, city services, map, news feed, etc.

and handsomely rewarded² by their users, or their fans.³ It is very interesting that netizens willingly pay when they can get Biaoqingbao featuring their idol figures for free. For some designers, their Biaoqing are so lucrative that they make Biaoqingbao their career. This would have been quite unimaginable even five years ago, in 2013.

Biaoqingbao has spawned new types of economic activities on Chinese social media, especially on WeChat. The purpose of this paper is to investigate Biaoqingbao-induced economic activities. To be more specific, I will investigate why netizens willingly spend money on free Biaoqingbao. To answer this question, it is necessary to find out what in the Biaoqing figures and their Biaoqingbao attracts users so much that they willingly and voluntarily open their wallets.

For this purpose, I decided to conduct a case study in which I closely followed the fan-community of idolized Biaoqing figures. Among the numerous idolized Biaoqingbao figures, Eggy, a cat, and Budding Pop, a cartoon image, are chosen as a case in point for mainly three reasons. First, they are one of the top Biaoqingbao on WeChat, which means they are among the most popular ones. Second, they have generated a fan-community, and are capable of attracting “reward” on WeChat and attracting buyers through merchandise.⁴ Third, the two figures represent different types in terms of fan-group formation. Information of the two Biaoqing figures is presented in figure 1.

In this research, I will follow fans’ actions and opinions in the two Biaoqingbao communities to find out why and how the two Biaoqing figures can bring handsome revenue for their designers.

	Eggy	Budding Pop
Idolized Biaoqing figure		
Creation time	2016	2013
Initial platform of popularity	WeChat	Weibo
Designer	Individual	First individual, now group
Major active social media	WeChat, Weibo, Tik Tok, Taobao	WeChat, Weibo, Tik Tok, Taobao
Figure 1. Information of Eggy and Budding Pop Biaoqingbao		

² Reward (赞赏) is a function on WeChat Sticker Gallery through which users can donate money to Biaoqing designers they appreciate.

³ http://slide.news.sina.com.cn/slide_1_65716_239000.html#p=12 retrieved 10 September, 2018.

⁴ The exact revenue generated by the figures is not accessible. They are chosen on the basis of their presence on various social media, many of which involve payment or reward functions, for instance WeChat (a multifunctional instant communication app), Taobao (an online shopping website), Weibo (a social media platform similar to Twitter), Tik Tok (a short video sharing and making app, with online store function).

The fan community of Egggy Biaoqingbao

Egggy Biaoqingbao

The figure of Egggy, known as Happy before December 2017, was originally created in 2014 by Weiyi Li to test the function of a cartoon-making software. After being posted on Weibo and zcool.com.cn (a Chinese social media catering to the communication among designers), the GIFs featuring Egggy were warmly received on both platforms, reposted 1,593 times on the former and viewed 5,796 times on the latter. However, the Biaoqingbao of Egggy did not come into being until two years later when Li, who quit his job and became a freelancer, picked up the creation of Egggy and began to focus on it. In February 2016, Li published the first Egggy Biaoqingbao on WeChat Sticker Gallery, and immediately Egggy won great popularity. The first Egggy Biaoqingbao was liked by WeChat users so much that they generously rewarded it more than six thousand times, representing at least ¥12,000 (€1,536).⁵ Since then, Li regularly publishes Egggy Biaoqingbao on WeChat. At the time this paper is being written (September 2018), there are already 14 Egggy Biaoqingbao.

In the creation of Egggy Biaoqingbao, Li added other figures. In December 2016, Popo, Egggy's roommate and girlfriend, was introduced, and in December 2017, Daimi, Egggy's cousin appeared. In the Egggy Biaoqingbao, the three cats often appear together, especially Egggy and Popo (see figure 2).

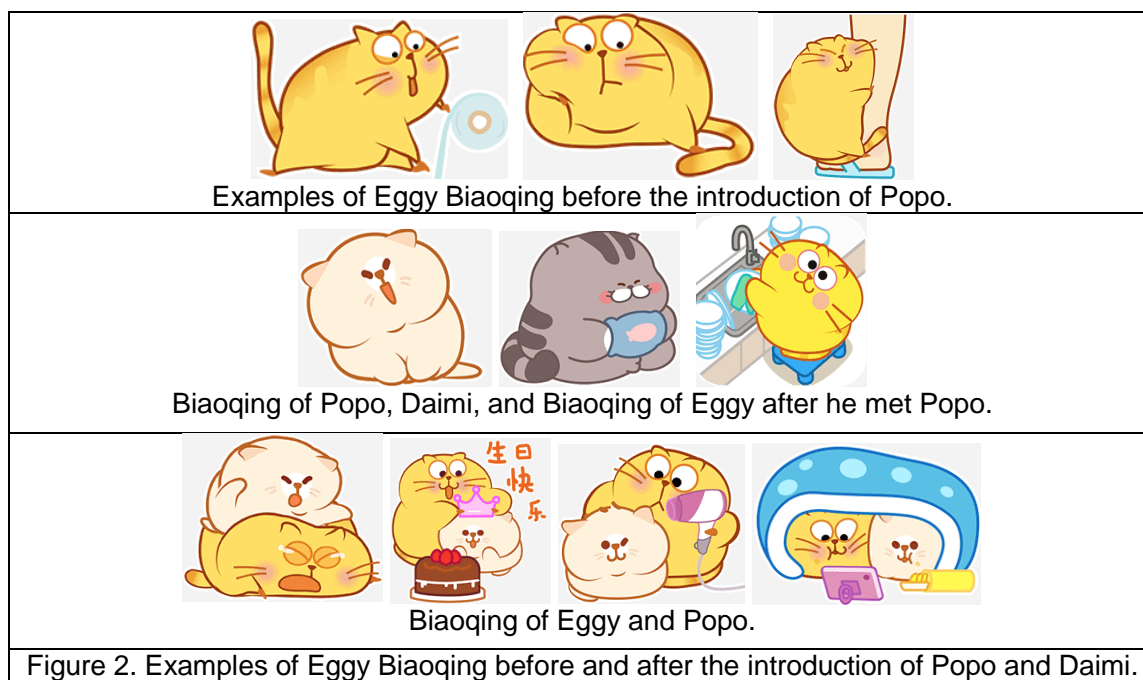


Figure 2. Examples of Egggy Biaoqing before and after the introduction of Popo and Daimi.

⁵ According to the official statistics of WeChat, the average is ¥2.02 per reward (Song & Yan, 2016).

To find out how and why netizens' wallets are willingly opened for Eggy, Li's posts on Weibo, official account articles and Biaoqingbao on WeChat, including the actions of netizens (e.g. comment, reward, like, repost, share), are closely followed and analyzed. WeChat official account articles are used for announcing the publication of new Biaoqingbao, sharing Eggy profile pictures and cell phone wallpaper. Weibo posts, besides broadcasting new Biaoqingbao and sharing computer wallpaper, are used for collecting opinions and ideas from fans, telling little stories of Eggy and Popo, and publishing information about merchandise. Li's WeChat official account did not have the comment function until January 2017. That is why he resorted to Weibo, whose comment function is full-fledged, for better communication with fans. Restricted by the affordances of the platforms, fans may perform different actions on the two social media. For this reason, both platforms are chosen as data collection sites. Collected data are presented in table 1.

Platform	N	Netizen action
WeChat official account articles	91	Comment, view, like
Weibo posts	108	Comment, repost, like
Biaoqingbao on WeChat Sticker Gallery	14	Reward, download

Table 1. Data of Eggy Biaoqingbao

There are several types of action on each platform, but not every action is followed in my case study. To answer the research question, comments of netizens are followed to collect information, including their feelings and attitudes towards the Biaoqing, and their stories related to the Biaoqing, all of which are revealing of what happens in the fan community.

Fans' description of the cats and their Biaoqing

Fans rarely comment on the Biaoqing, and the majority focus on the protagonists. Cute (可爱) and *méng* (萌)⁶ are the most used descriptions, which are the defining characters omnipresent in every Biaoqing of Eggy, Popo and Daimi. Other descriptions for Eggy include charming, soft, super, lovely, funny, naughty (see comments 1-7 in figure 3). The temperament of Eggy is not static and flat, but dynamic and multifaceted. In different Biaoqingbao, Eggy demonstrates

⁶ *Méng* (萌, literally: cute), is a concept imported from Japanese culture. In China, *méng* can be used to describe humans being as well as non-human (including animals, real or fictional, toys, dolls, etc.). The objects or people described as *méng* are mostly cute, adorable, innocent, and arouse people's desire to protect them from the corruption of adulthood (AnimeNation Anime News Blog » Blog Archive » Ask John, 2015; Tack, 2012). *Méng* (萌) is synonymous with cute (可爱). In the translation of comments, *méng* is used to translate the neologism 萌, and cute to translate 可爱.

different traits, sometimes cute, sometimes naughty, sometimes sweet, sometimes romantic (see comments 8-12 in figure 3). The multifaceted nature of the image of Eggy, the changing characteristics and topics of different Eggy Biaoqingbao are important reasons why fans follow Eggy. Knowing that the next Biaoqingbao might provide Biaoqing that suit them better than others, fans often eagerly wait for the publication of new Eggy Biaoqingbao. And they even take pride in being the first ones to comment, or to give reward, as shown in the comment of a fan: 😊
 😊 busy rewarding, and I failed to be the first one to comment!! Haha, but I am the third to reward!! 🍷🍷

1	蛋黄 (开心) 猫是只有超有魅力的喵，男女老少通吃	Eggy (Happy) is a super charming cat. Everyone likes it, male and female, young and old
2	软萌软萌的	Soft and cute
3	最爱蛋黄猫～形象生动又呆萌可爱	Love Eggy the most~ His image is vivid, nerdy, <i>méng</i> and cute
4	超乖超赞的蛋黄，非常可爱了	Super lovely Eggy. Very cute
5	蛋黄猫好像小仙女家的智障 哇咔咔	Eggy is like a silly cat of a fairy, hahahaha
6	蛋黄是戏精，那小表情，没谁了，超级喜欢。	Eggy is so good at performing. His facial expressions, nobody is his equal. Super like him.
7	开心总是在挨打的边缘试探 然后成功挨打	Happy always testing the limit, and then succeeds in annoying [Popo]
8	谁让你这么帅呢，你都不知道，你弹琴的姿势是那么的优美，就连你发飙的表情都是这么酷，爱你	Why you are so handsome. You don't know that the way you play piano is so beautiful. Even when you get angry, your expression is so cool. Love you
9	从第一期到现在这么多的惊喜，可爱的它，霸气的它，闷骚的它，得瑟的它，萌萌的它	Since the first Biaoqingbao till now, there have been so many surprises. Cute Eggy, manly Eggy, dirty Eggy, bragging Eggy, and <i>méng</i> Eggy
10	感觉蛋黄猫变得更天真可爱了，是和噗噗的爱情带来的单纯美好喵	I feel that Eggy has become more innocent and cute. It's the result of the sweet and pure love with Popo
11	这一期开心从邪魅路线重回呆萌小样儿	This time Happy returns from the enigmatic style to the old nerdy <i>méng</i> style
12	用了那么多季的表情包，那天我老公忽然跟我说：你有没有发现蛋黄原来是一只有主人的宠物猫，后来有了噗噗以后就成精了	After so many Biaoqingbao, one day my husband suddenly told me: Eggy used to be a pet, but after he got Popo, he became a cat with a human soul

Figure 3. Descriptions of Eggy's characteristics

Aside from expressing their fondness for Eggy, Popo and Daimi as cats, fans often personify them and ascribe human characteristics to them. For instance, fans treat Eggy as a role model, either for themselves, or for their boyfriends/husbands (see comments 1-4 in figure 4). Some fans identify the characteristics and qualities of themselves or their loved ones in the cats (see comments 5-8 in figure 4). For their fans, Eggy, Popo and Daimi are not merely the cartoon figures in Biaoqingbao anymore. They are what their followers want to be, and they are the

cartoon version of their fans. In the eyes of the fans, Eggy is a moral model, a role model of 'ideal' social behavior.

1	每天都要像开心一样乐观，积极向上喔，加油喵！	I want to be as optimistic and positive as Happy. Cheer up!
2	你认真工作的样子真的好有魅力和魄力，你温柔而不失霸气，多情而有专情，我从你贱贱的微笑里看到你满满的自信	The way your work hard is so charming. You are gentle and manly, warm-hearted and devoted. I see confidence in your naughty smile
3	蛋黄真是标准的大暖男 我也想要一个这样的男友	Eggy is a super warm boy. I want a boyfriend like him
4	最暖心的就是开心骑着摩托来接噗噗的那一幕，简直融化了我的少女心啊，最简单的浪漫，最单纯的感情，大概就是开心和噗噗为我们诠释的	The warmest is when Happy picking Popo up with his motor. It's almost melting my hear. The simplest romance and the purest feeling are what Happy and Popo show us
5	放屁那个太可爱了，和我老婆一起时简直一摸一样	The Biaoqing of Eggy farting is so cute. Exactly what happened between me and my wife
6	我觉得我家胖子和蛋黄猫长的好像啊，吃东西动作都好像，结果就是蛋黄猫一出表情我就下载	My fatty boy resembles Eggy a lot. Even the way they eat is similar. Consequently, I download every Eggy Biaoqingbao when it's published
7	啊呀呀，我可爱的开心呀，对你爱爱爱不完~~~像极了我男票，胖胖的，懒懒的，却又勤奋上进~	Ayaya, my cute Happy, my love for you will never end~~~ Eggy is so much like my boyfriend, plump, lazy, but at the same time diligent and ambitious~
8	呆咪：爱情的铜臭味 每个节都被他俩过成情人节	Daimi: The sting of romance. They make every holiday Valentine's Day ⁷

Figure 4. Moral descriptions of Eggy

The emotions, feelings, actions the cats invoke in fans

There are many comments where fans share their emotions and feelings towards Eggy, Popo and Daimi, and their actions concerning the three cats. These comments are very revealing of why fans are fascinated by them.

⁷ This is a comment on a Biaoqingbao featuring the daily activities of the couple Eggy and Popo. The fan is employing the voice of Daimi, a cat without a girlfriend, to joke about a single's attitude towards the daily life of couples.

Emotions and feelings

Eggy is an image IP, a brand. In this sense, the fans are consumers. Emotional attachment is one of the most important reasons why fans follow their idols (Huang, Lin, & Phau, 2015; Park, et al., 2010; Park, MacInnis, & Priester, 2006). Besides fondness for and seeing themselves in the three cats, fans have various other emotional experiences with the Biaoqing figures. For some, Eggy and Popo heal their emotional wounds and bring them good mood (comments 1 and 2 in figure 5). For some, Eggy and Popo support them through their bad patches and provide them a safe haven away from the hustle and bustle of life (comments 3-5 in figure 5). For some couples, the Biaoqing of Eggy and Popo are witness of their love, and an indispensable part of the communication with their loved ones (see comments 6 and 7 in figure 5). To many followers, Eggy and Popo are a moral support that keeps them company through the highs and lows in life. For followers, this emotional bond imposes a symbolic meaning on Eggy and Popo. The Biaoqing are the same for everyone, but the feelings and emotions they invoke in each follower are (experienced as) personal and unique. For their fans, the two cats are no longer simply virtual figures in Biaoqingbao, but are support, companionship, love, warmth, etc.

Aside from the cats' cute appearances and personified characters, emotional attachment and moral value appreciation, fans also follow Eggy Biaoqingbao for practical reasons. For many followers, the cats bring them emotional enjoyment (see comment 2 in figure 5), provide them comfort in their hard times (see comments 4 and 5 in figure 5). For many couples, the Biaoqing of the cats not only provide them with great convenience in daily communication (comments 7 and 8 in figure 5), but also become an important means for maintaining their relationship, for instance, resolving their conflicts, solving their misunderstandings (see comments 9 and 10 in figure 5).

1	喜欢所有噗噗和蛋黄同框的表情！太有爱啦，看了治愈又想谈恋爱！	I like all the Biaoqing where Popo and Eggy are together! Full of love. They heal me and make me want to be in love again!
2	感觉蛋黄就是正能量，每次看到心情都会豁然开朗	Eggy is positive energy. Seeing him puts me in a good mood
3	看到开心和噗噗就会有幸福感从心底升起，两只猫咪的出现的地点，是疲惫生活中的柔软角落	A sense of happiness will rise in my heart when I see Happy and Popo. Wherever the two cats are, it's a soft spot where I can have a rest from my busy tiring life
4	感谢蛋黄一家陪我走过了一年 这一年 每逢困境 我都会看蛋黄猫 给我带来快乐 带来勇气...	Thanks for the companion of the Eggy family. Throughout this year, whenever I was in trouble, I would look at Eggy. He brought me happiness and courage...

5	我当年高考压力大时就一直刷开心猫撸猫的那个表情，简直就是我的心灵鸡汤，全世界最棒的开心	Before college entrance exam, whenever I felt stressed, I would have a look at the Biaoqing of Happy. It's almost the chicken soup for my soul. Happy is the best in the world
6	以前一个同学推荐了蛋黄猫的表情包，我觉得好玩就用了，后来发给一个女同学，她也很喜欢，现在那个女生是我女朋友，谢谢蛋黄猫给我们带来的缘分	A classmate recommended Eggy Biaoqingbao to me, and I began to use them because they are funny. Later I sent them to a girl, and she liked them too. Now that girl is my girlfriend. Thank Eggy for bringing us together
7	蛋黄和噗噗的每一季都和先生我俩的状态神同步，……看着蛋黄和噗噗成长的日子感觉就像我和先生的 Q 版小日记，不用言语，发一个表情给对方完全就能达意，很感动，谢谢一叔和一婶，感谢蛋黄和噗噗的陪伴。	The Biaoqingbao of Eggy and Popo sync precisely with the life of me and my husband. Their Biaoqingbao are like the diary of me and my husband. No need of words, we would understand each other through a Biaoqing. Thank you Li and your girlfriend. Thanks for the companion of Eggy and Popo.
8	我和我男朋友是军恋，蛋黄猫是我们军恋路上的开心果，我们的聊天记录每天要发一百遍蛋黄猫，就像我俩的生活，感谢有蛋黄猫，在难过的时候，可以让我们坚强，快乐	My boyfriend is a soldier and we cannot see each other so often. Eggy brings happiness to our relationship. Every day, we would use Eggy in chat for a hundred times. Eggy witnesses our life. Thank Eggy for making us strong in sadness and bringing us happiness
9	超级喜欢蛋黄猫。真心奇了怪，每次男朋友发蛋黄猫表情，我即便再生气都一秒破功。看到萌萌的蛋黄，就是气不出来。	I'm super big on Eggy. It's really strange that when my boyfriend sent me Eggy Biaoqing, my anger would vanish, no matter how mad I was at him. The sight of <i>méng</i> Eggy eases my anger.
10	我老公是外国人，我们异地恋好多年了，一直没有机会在地球上彻底凑在一起，好几次都互相有误会，互相不理解，差点黄了。。我记得有一天我好生气的，对他有误解，我随手发了个蛋黄猫和噗噗猫打架的表情，之后我们竟然笑了起来，后来互相又发了很多蛋黄猫系列的表情，真的化解了好多矛盾！我对这份感情的珍惜和坚持，真的非常感恩蛋黄猫和噗噗猫的陪伴！	My husband is a foreigner and we had a long-distance relationship for several years, but never had a good chance to meet each other. We often misunderstood each other and almost broke up... One day I misunderstood him and got furious. But when I sent him a Biaoqing of Eggy and Popo fighting with each other, we both began to laugh. After that we sent each other many Eggy Biaoqing, and this really helped us solve many misunderstandings! I'm truly grateful to Eggy and Popo for their companion in my relationship!
Figure 5. Fans' emotional experiences with Eggy and Popo		

Actions

Attachment to, fondness for and appreciation of Eggy are highly consequential, resulting in various actions and reactions in fans. The most common actions of fans are using Eggy Biaoqing, following and sharing content relevant to Eggy on their social media. After the fourteenth Eggy

Biaoqingbao was published, it was ranked sixth out of over two thousand new Biaoqingbao (see figure 6).⁸ The article posted on Eggy WeChat official account was widely read and liked by fans (see figure 6). In the comments, fans share what they did to show how much they were fascinated by Eggy. Many would regularly check the home page of Li for the latest information of Eggy Biaoqingbao. The actions and reactions of some fans are not so common, for instance, dreaming about the publication of new Eggy Biaoqingbao, bursting out in laughter upon the publication of new Biaoqingbao, or downloading an app only for the purpose of watching Eggy videos. The actions and reactions reported by fans all directly reflect their intensive fondness for Eggy and their fascination with Eggy Biaoqingbao.

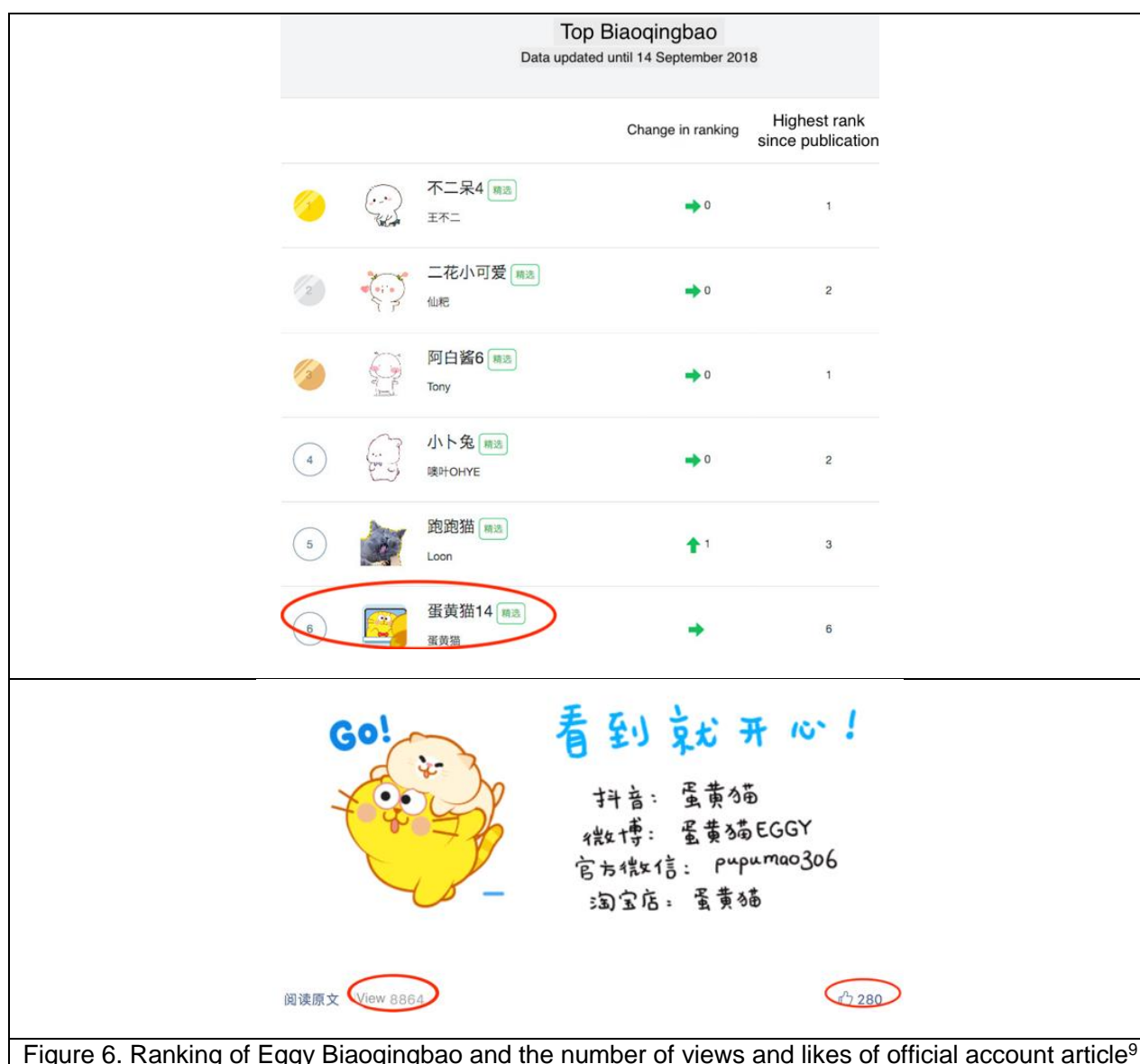


Figure 6. Ranking of Eggy Biaoqingbao and the number of views and likes of official account article⁹

⁸ Over 70 Biaoqingbao are published every day on WeChat Biaoqing Open Platform (Biaoqingjiang, 2018). The ranking of top Biaoqingbao is based on usage frequency in the last few days or last month.

⁹ The article on WeChat official account was published on 14 September 2018.

The actions of fans are not restricted to their own lives, and the influence of their actions extends to people around them, for instance family members, friends, colleagues, etc. In some cases, fans recommend Eggy Biaoqingbao to others at their own initiative; while in some cases, followers' using Eggy Biaoqing is enough to attract more fans for Eggy (see comments 1-5 in figure 7). These actions of fans reveal how individual engagement turns into community formation.

Some fans go a step further. They are not only crazy about the cats and their Biaoqing, but began to imitate Eggy and Popo, or involve them in their offline life. For instance, a little boy imitated the waving gesture of Eggy, couples used the stickers or hats of Eggy and Popo to symbolize their love, and a teacher used the image of Eggy in her teaching (see comments 6-9 in figure 7). By so doing, fans are, to some extent, projecting themselves on cats and at the same time treating the cats as themselves. Underlying these actions is fans' aspiration for the ideal qualities or way of being embodied in the cats. Such aspiration is "light" in the sense that it is the personal preference of fans. However, it is at the same time "heavy" in the sense that the aspiration has transformed into willingness to spend money on the Biaoqing figures, i.e. to reward the Biaoqingbao and pay for merchandise. These actions are Biaoqingbao-induced economic activities, which will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

1	我想买台历,可是我是海外党怕寄丢,所以我强烈的给我娘安利蛋黄,我们都是这些喵的粉丝	I wanted to buy Eggy calendar, but I am overseas, and I'm afraid it might be lost during delivery. So I strongly recommended Eggy to my mom. We are both his fans
2	我还以为只有我一个人这么痴迷它呢,每天逮着谁都给谁发我们的黄黄,爱它爱到不能自拔了	I thought I was the only one so fascinated by it. I use Eggy Biaoqing with everyone who contacts me on WeChat. I'm lost in my love for it
3	我们公司的人被我带的都下载了开心的表情	All my colleagues have downloaded Happy Biaoqingbao after seeing me using them
4	第一次在微信看到表情包的时候就超级喜欢胖胖的小家伙了!给老爸发了几次之后老爸也喜欢上了,看到就觉得治愈	The first time I saw his Biaoqing, I liked this chubby kiddy! My dad began to like him after having received his Biaoqing from me. Eggy comforts the soul
5	有个猫奴朋友之前最喜欢蹬拖鞋那个表情,她家的喵爱做一样的动作……我一发给她够不到小鱼干的表情,她立马就去下载了。	A cat-loving friend likes the Biaoqing of Eggy playing with a sleeper. Her cat does the same..... After I sent her the Biaoqing of Eggy failing to reach a fish, she immediately downloaded the Biaoqingbao.
6	萌死了每天等着抖音更新。。。小外甥看蛋黄猫停不下来还跟着视频模仿三倍抖动,猫粮吃光,学猫叫等等,他娘还让他在小荧星课上表演三倍抖动。	So <i>méng</i> . I wait for new videos of Eggy everyday...My little nephew simply cannot move his eyes away from the videos. He even imitates Eggy. His mom encouraged him to perform the waving of Eggy in his class.
7	想买他俩的同款帽子和男票一起戴	I want to buy hats the same as Eggy's and Popo's for me and my boyfriend

8	别人结婚证照片衣服上贴小爱心，我们贴蛋黄和噗噗！希望像他们一样幸福一辈子	Other couples put heart stickers on their clothes when taking marriage pictures. We used Eggy and Popo stickers! Hope we will be as happy as them
9	在香港做英文老師的我，根據學生的口語考試出現問題，用開心貓做了各種示範！	As an English teacher in Hong Kong, I used Happy to explain students' mistakes in oral exam!

Figure 7. Fans' actions concerning Eggy

Reasons for fans to reward and buy merchandise

The answer to the question why fans and followers reward Eggy Biaoqing and buy Eggy-related merchandise can be found in the self-reported reasons in their comments. According to followers, there are mainly three reasons. First, followers reward because the cats are cute, lovely and excellent, and they like their Biaoqing, or the merchandise (see comments 1-4 in figure 8). Second, they reward and buy merchandise so that the cats will have money for fish (see comment 5 in figure 8), i.e. that they want Li to earn money. Third, they reward Biaoqingbao and buy merchandise for Li to keep on creating Eggy Biaoqingbao (see comments 6-8 in figure 8). Besides these three major reasons, some fans reward to express their appreciation to Li (see comments 9-10 in figure 8), and some fans reward because Eggy and Popo resemble themselves or their loved ones (see comment 11 in figure 8).

1	挂件超级棒，超级超级可爱，每天带着开心出门	The bangle ¹⁰ is super good super cute. I bring it with me everyday
2	美好的表情，开通后第一时间打赏	Beautiful Biaoqing. I rewarded immediately
3	太可爱啦！已经下载+打赏+推荐给群里的朋友	So cute! Already downloaded, rewarded, and recommended to friends
4	这么优秀的漫画，应该多多的赞助	Such excellent cartoon deserves a lot of reward
5	直接打赏 10 块给开心噗噗加小鱼干🐟	I rewarded ¥10 to buy fish for Happy and Popo 🐟
6	唯一会打赏的表情包期待更多互动	The only Biaoqingbao I reward. Looking forward to more interaction
7	兄弟 永远别断蛋黄猫好吗 我可是一直打赏的	Bro, please keep on creating Eggy Biaoqing. I have been rewarding all the time
8	这是我第一次看到广告植入这么开心的，因为有市场蛋黄猫就会出更多的表情啦！店里的每一种毛绒公仔都买了，真的太喜欢了！！	This is the first time I am so happy to see product placement, because if Eggy has a market there will be more Eggy Biaoqingbao! I have bought every doll in the store. I like Eggy so much!!
9	一叔一婶辛苦了，从未让我们失望过，已赞赏	Uncle and aunt Li ¹¹ thanks for your hard working. You never disappoint us. Already rewarded

¹⁰ Bangle in this case refers to an accessory that is hang on handbags or backpacks for decoration.

¹¹ Uncle Li and aunt Li are the pet names for the designer Li and his girlfriend.

10	艺术家画得很棒～蛋黄猫眼神很到位～嘴部表情也生动可爱～肥萌啊超喜欢，虽然打赏的不多～对艺术家创作比心❤️	The artist draws really well~ The expressions of Eggy are very vivid~ and the mouse is also cute~ chubby and <i>méng</i> . I super like it. Though the reward is not much~ but it's my thanks for the creation of the artist ❤️
11	我妈总说肉乃乃的蛋黄猫蠢蠢胖胖憨憨的可爱样子简直就是我，12 弹一出就赞赏了 2 块钱	My mom always says that the nerdy chubby cute Eggy is the same as me. She immediately rewarded the 12 th Biaoqingbao ¥2

Figure 8. Self-reported reasons for rewarding

Attitudes towards the designer

In the comments, followers often express their appreciation and gratitude to the designer and his girlfriend for their effort in creating new Biaoqing, and for the high quality of their creation (see comments 4, 9-10 in figure 8 and comment 1 in figure 9). Some fans extend their fondness for Eggy to the designer, and they often express good wishes to him (see comments 2 and 3 in figure 9), or try to know more about him (see comments 4-6 in figure 9).

1	一叔非常注重细节 开心和噗噗的形象可爱至极 往往玩了好久后才发现亮点 每个细微的点 都让我玩的兴奋不已 一直会支持下去 一叔加油	Uncle Li pays extreme attention to details. The images of Happy and Popo are super cute. I often fail to notice the catchphrase until after having used the Biaoqing for quite some time. Every detail makes me so excited. I will follow Eggy. Hurray uncle Li
2	灵感永不枯竭，不愧是我爱的一叔一婶儿！	Wish you have endless inspiration. That are the uncle and aunt Li I love!
3	一叔一婶早日有个小开心	Wish you have your baby Happy soon
4	一叔，看到你的蛋黄猫作品很开心，仿佛可以看到作品背后作者的温暖与幸福	Uncle Li, I seem to see your warmth and happiness through the Eggy you created
5	感谢你创意出来这么完美的蛋黄猫，你一定有一颗善良的柔软的内心	Thanks for creating such perfect Eggy. You must have a kind and gentle heart
6	作者暴露年龄了 典型 80 后啊	The designer leaks his age. He is typically the 80's generation

Figure 9. Comments concerning the designer

Li's actions concerning Eggy Biaoqingbao

After having checked followers' opinions and actions, it is time to have a look at the actions of Li, the designer. In his opinion, Eggy and Popo are "two naughty angels" (两只磨人的小妖精). Li, a cat person himself, designed Eggy Biaoqingbao specific for people who love cats. In his official account article on 17 November 2016, Li expressed his hope that Eggy Biaoqing will be loved by

cat-lovers. For Li, Eggy Biaoqingbao is his career,¹² but at the same time it marks some big events in his life.¹³ For instance, Eggy's girlfriend Popo is named after Li's girlfriend, and he draws inspiration from his girlfriend in the creation of new Biaoqing. This is quite clearly demonstrated in the different style of Eggy before and after the introduction of Popo (see figure 2 and comment 12 in figure 3).

Apart from his own observations and experiences, Li collected the opinions of followers to draw inspiration for Eggy Biaoqingbao. On 20 February 2016, Li posted an article on his WeChat official account to announce the publication of the second Eggy Biaoqingbao. At the end of the article, there is an questionnaire about netizens' impressions of Eggy, including its gender, sexual orientation, zodiac, character, personality, and whether it's sterilized or not. In the article on 18 May 2016, Li wrote to his audience that they could leave him a message if they have some interesting ideas for the next Eggy Biaoqingbao. Besides the content of Biaoqing, Li also got ideas from fans for the forms of Biaoqing. For instance, in a WeChat official account article on 8 June 2016, Li expressed his surprise at the handiness of Biaoqing without any texts, which was the suggestion from fans of Eggy. It's obvious that the designer and netizens, or fans, are co-constructing the image of Eggy and Eggy Biaoqingbao.

Light community, heavy influence

Fans follow Eggy Biaoqingbao for various different yet similar reasons. To sum up, there are four major reasons. First, the cute appearance and naughty character of the cats are very attractive to fans. Second, Eggy Biaoqing present highly personified activities which followers perform in their daily lives. Third, fans appreciate the qualities they see in the cats, for instance positive, caring, warm, etc., and they treat the cats as their role models. Fourth, fans aspire to the ideal life of the cats. The cute and happy lives of the three cats attract fans, and their personified activities enable fans to project themselves in Eggy Biaoqing.

Some fans spent hours on making up stories with Eggy Biaoqing, just for the purpose of posting them on Weibo and notice Li of their creation; some take pride in being the first ones to comment or to give reward; some regard the publication of new Biaoqingbao as the best present for themselves. In this community fans comment on, create and repost Eggy-related content on WeChat, Weibo and other social media. All these actions, which are spontaneous and performed for fun, are "light". While performing such light Eggy-fan identity work, fans occasionally, consciously or subconsciously, also indicate in passing their age, job, position, and other

¹² http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2018-08/06/content_58149155.htm retrieved 2 September, 2018.

¹³ https://m.sohu.com/n/469693539/?wscrid=95360_4 retrieved 25 September, 2018.

identities related to ethnic background, gender, social status, etc., i.e. the typical features of traditional, robust, fixed or “heavy” communities.

In the Eggie fan community, strong ties, weak ties and virtual ties co-exist (Levin & Cross, 2004; Krackhardt, 2003; Granovetter, 1983). On the one hand, fans forward Eggie related Biaoqing, articles, short videos, etc. to family members, friends, colleagues, thus building a community around their own fascination. On the other hand, the majority of the followers mostly do not know each other, work in various fields, live in different cities, and are of different age and gender. The only thing they have in common is that they are users of Eggie Biaoqing who enjoy the fun brought by the cat figures. Members’ attachment to the community resides solely in their fondness for the cat figures and their Biaoqing, and there is no shared background or space to tie members together. This fan community is open to anyone and undemanding in terms of membership, and thus lacks a stable and robust structure. In this sense, the Eggie community defies traditional communities of practice (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999; Wenger, 2011) or affinity spaces (Gee, 2005), and they form *de facto* a light community (Blommaert, 2018, 2017; Blommaert & Varis, 2015). Light communities are characterized by their micro-hegemonic character: light features “rule” such communities. Members adopt resources and normative behavioral templates which define the light feature of the community to perform identities, i.e. micro-hegemonic identities (Blommaert, 2017b, 2018).

The online Eggie-fan community is light, and there are no shared traditional bureaucratic parameters to bind members together, but its influence is heavy and it spills offline. The light community can generate a strong sense of belonging offline. For instance, when a fan saw a girl with a Happy merchandise, she felt the urge to shake hands with the girl. Other more consequential influences are reflected in fans’ enthusiasm in rewarding and buying merchandise. Many fans, especially couples, strongly express their desire for the hats, clothes, sleepers, bowties worn by the cats. Micro-hegemonic identity is working here. Their aspiration to be a happy couple as Eggie and Popo directs them to get what the cats use in their daily life, which generates great (quasi rigid) demand for Eggie merchandise. By using the merchandise of the happy cat couple, fans become happy couples, at least in their own mind. The market for merchandise, together with the willingness to reward Biaoqingbao and buy merchandise, might bring enough income for (top) designers to work full-time on the creation of Biaoqingbao.¹⁴ In this sense, Biaoqingbao has hatched a new economic practice, a new type of cultural industry.

¹⁴ https://m.sohu.com/n/469693539/?wscrid=95360_4 retrieved 25 September, 2018.

The fan community of Budding Pop

Budding Pop Biaoqingbao

Budding Pop is a round-headed figure with a plant sprout on top of its head (see figure 10). The sprout, which is budding and popping up, symbolizes growth. This figure, drawn by a high school girl for fun in December 2013, was reposted over one thousand times on Weibo after its debut. After that, its designer Mao Tui (pseudonym) shared more and more Budding Pop Biaoqing on Weibo. This gradually attracted a group of followers that developed into a fan base. By February 2014, Mao Tui's post sharing Budding Pop Biaoqingbao fetched as many as 5,945 times of reposting on Weibo. Budding Pop and its Biaoqingbao gradually became one of the most popular ones on QQ and WeChat.¹⁵ In September 2014, Mao Tui joined Block 12 Culture, a cartoon image IP management company. After that Mao Tui has been working with a team to create Budding Pop Biaoqingbao. The Budding Pop figure and Biaoqingbao attract thousands of fans. By June 2014, one year after Mao Tui became a Weibo user, the number of her fans increased from several thousand to one hundred thousand; by June 2015, the number rose to six hundred thousand; and by June 2016, the number was over one million.¹⁶



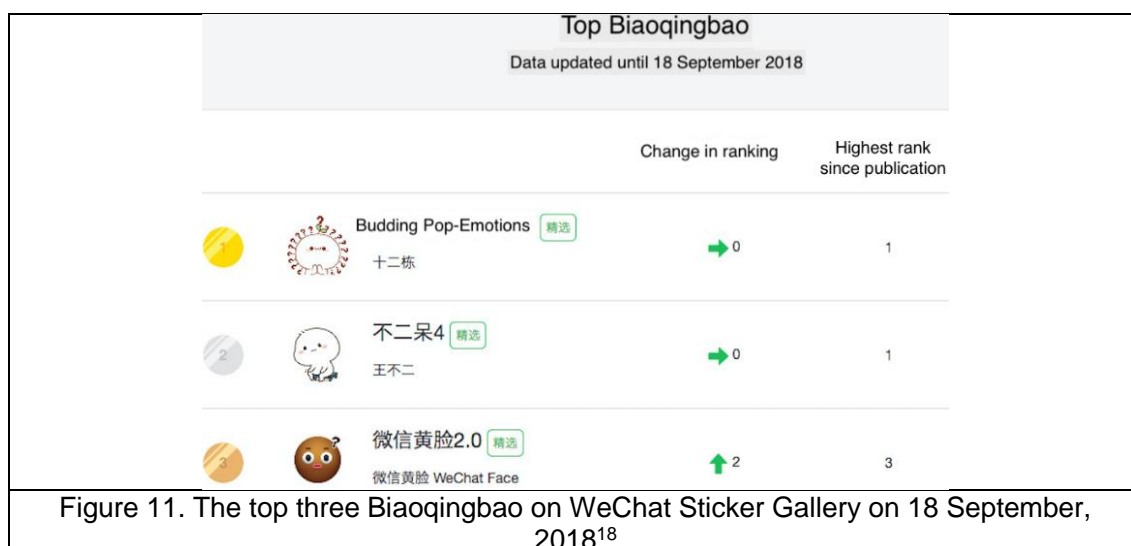
Figure 10. Budding Pop Biaoqing

Budding Pop's presence is not only felt on Weibo but also on WeChat. When WeChat launched Biaoqing Open Platform in July 2015, Budding Pop Biaoqingbao became a hit, sent over 350 million times on WeChat within two months of publication.¹⁷ At the same time, the promotion and marketing by Block 12 Culture provided a sustaining dynamo for the popularity of Budding Pop. So far, Budding Pop is still among the top Biaoqingbao on WeChat Sticker Gallery (see figure 11).

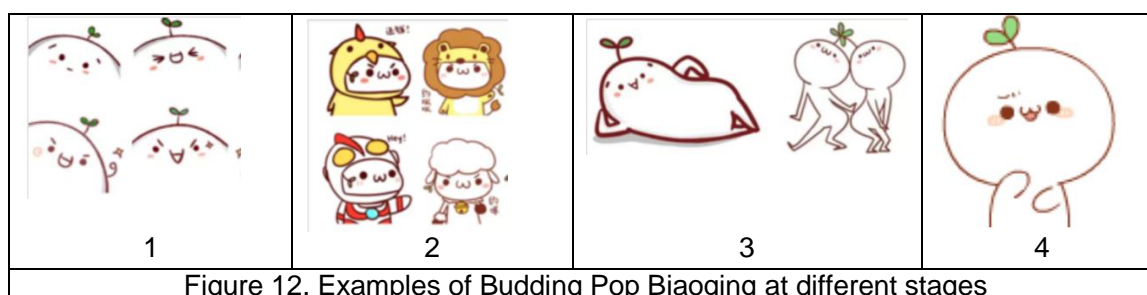
¹⁵ https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E9%95%BF%E8%8D%89%E9%A2%9C%E6%96%87%E5%AD%97/19274175?fr=zhidao_relate retrieved 2 September, 2018.

¹⁶ https://www.weibo.com/132419214?topnav=1&wvr=6&topsug=1&is_all=1&is_search=1&key_word=%E7%BA%AA%E5%BF%B5#_0 retrieved 2 September, 2018.

¹⁷ https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA5Mjl1MjkxNg==&mid=400081989&idx=1&sn=1751617a5761d732d8a6bebcd3f986bd&scene=1&srcid=1111FdVijMbu8W3zeVI6c2UQ#rd retrieved 23 September, 2018.



The image of Budding Pop experienced four stages (see figure 12).¹⁹ The first stage features Japanese style emoticons (e.g. (‘_·’) (≧▽≦) (·`v´·) etc.). The second stage features outfits of different cartoon figures. The third stage combines the characters of cute with bitchy and slightly dirty. In the fourth stage, cute and innocent become the dominant characters. The four stages constitute an exploration for the optimal character for the image of Budding Pop. All Budding Pop Biaoqingbao on WeChat Sticker Gallery are of cute and innocent style.



Before June 2014, the fan community was mainly based on Weibo. After June 2014, when Mao Tui created an official account of Budding Pop on WeChat, more and more fan activities began to take place on WeChat, including, commenting,²⁰ rewarding, liking, and sharing articles. In order to find out why fans reward the Biaoqingbao and pay for merchandise, the WeChat official account articles and Weibo posts of Mao Tui are followed and analyzed. As Mao Tui updates at least once every two days on WeChat official accounts since June 2014, and puts at least five posts on Weibo every day since December 2013, it is not possible to follow all her articles and posts. For this reason, two WeChat official account articles and three Weibo posts are selected

¹⁸ <https://sticker.weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/mmemoticon-bin/emoticonview?oper=billboard&t=rank/index> retrieved 20 September, 2018.

¹⁹ https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E9%95%BF%E8%8D%89%E9%A2%9C%E6%96%87%E5%AD%97/19274175?fr=zhidao_relate retrieved 3 September, 2018.

²⁰ Mao Tui's WeChat official account became available for comment function in August 2015.

every month on the basis of the quantity of fan reactions. The resulting data are presented in table 2.

Platform	N	Netizen action
WeChat official account articles	102	Comment, read, like
Weibo posts	171	Comment, repost, like
Biaoqingbao on WeChat Sticker Gallery	15	Reward, download
Table 2. Data of Budding Pop Biaoqingbao		

WeChat official account is not only a forum to share Biaoqingbao, but also a platform to share Budding Pop comics, to involve fans in the comics and encourage them to leave comments and communicate with Mao Tui. Her Weibo posts are not restricted to Budding Pop, but also include whatever she is interested in. There is a clear change in Weibo posts after September 2014 when Mao Tui joined Block 12 Culture. After that the proportion of Budding-Pop-related content greatly increased.

In what follows, the fan community of Budding Pop will be analysed, including the actions and reactions of fans, their opinions towards Budding Pop, its Biaoqing, and towards Mao Tui, as well as the actions of Mao Tui.

Fans' opinions and actions

Fans' opinions and actions are all related to their fondness for Budding Pop. The majority of fans think Budding Pop is cute and lovable (see comments 1-4 in figure 13). Attracted by the cuteness of Budding Pop, fans not only share the pictures and Biaoqing of Budding Pop with their friends, but also make Budding Pop their profile pictures (see comments 1-3 in figure 13). Besides this, fans often leave comments to request Mao Tui to create Biaoqing of their liking (see comment 5 in figure 13), which would often become inspiration for the next Biaoqingbao. Mao Tui not only collects ideas from fans for inspiration, she also intensively engages fans. First, the topics of the comics, including popular video games, reality shows, military training, up-coming holidays, are highly relevant to fans, especially young people. Second, Mao Tui encourages fans to share their stories. For instance, on 17 September, 2018, a comic featuring college students' military training was published on her WeChat official account. At the end of the comic, Mao Tui left a message:

你还有哪些军训时的经历 不说出来会亏一个亿？ 酷爱在评论里告诉团子和大家吧！	What else have you experienced in military training? If you don't tell, it will be a huge loss. Please tell Pop and every one in comment!
--	---


Similar to the Eggy-fan community, four elements play an important role in the formation of a fan community of Budding Pop: (1) his cute attractive appearance, (2) fans' aspiration to be cute and

attractive, (3) intensive interaction between fans and the designer, (4) the spread by fans to their friends.

1	好萌!!! 抱走当头像了~	So <i>méng</i> !!! I'll make it my profile picture~
2	好可爱~ 老公你说哪个当我的头像比较好~	So cute~ My husband, which one do you think I should take for my profile picture~
3	Vinkyway: 回复@阿倩倩倩倩倩子:这个太萌!!! 抱走微信头像了要不要跟我一起	Vinkyway: reply @阿倩倩倩倩倩子: this is so <i>méng</i> !!! I'll make it my profile picture. Wanna do it with me
4	我最爱长草颜啦! 因为它让我感到无比的幸福!	I love Budding Pop the most! Because it makes me feel super happy!
5	求哆啦 A 梦的	Please draw Budding Pop with Doraemon outfit

Figure 13. Fans' attitudes to and actions on Budding Pop

Cute and *méng* are not the only descriptions given by fans. There are some other facets of Budding Pop, though these are not dominant ones. On 26 February 2014, Mao Tui posted nine Biaoqing of Dicky²¹ (Budding Pop in the shape of a penis), which accumulated 4,313 times of repost, 1,496 comments, and 683 likes from fans (see figure 14).

		(°Д°))) I completed this series at the risk of my life. You can feel pain even just by looking at them hahahahaha hahahahahaha (fuck off then because I'm busy so I used the same template (in fact it's because I'm lazy. Let's welcome your good friend, little Dicky \(\ ^o^ \)/
1	无节操.....23333333333333.....	shameless.....23333333333333 ²²
2	叶子大美女要瘦瘦瘦瘦瘦瘦: 好帅气!!! 不敢用。。。@秋秋 sophia	叶子大美女要瘦瘦瘦瘦瘦瘦: So handsome!!! But I dare not use it。。。

²¹ The name of the penis-shaped Budding Pop is 小杰宝 (*xiao jie bao*. Literally: small excellent baby), whose pronunciation is similar to 小鸡巴 (*xiao ji ba*. 鸡巴: a slang expression of penis, i.e. dick). On the one hand, 小杰宝 is an effort of Mao Tui to avoid the vulgar word 小鸡巴. On the other hand, this euphemized name imposes an element of cuteness on the image. Without an equivalent to this naming, I translated 小杰宝 to Dicky, which embodies the diminutive and the euphemism.

²² 233 is the code for laughing emoticon on Weibo. Netizens use 233 to represent laughing. The number of 3's represents the length of the laughing.

		@秋秋 sophia
3	萌的心肝颤🥰	So méng 🥰
4	小半只毛豆：这个...咱不好意思转了。。。@凯瑟喵【捂脸	小半只毛豆：This...I'm too shy to repost it。。。@凯瑟喵【cover face ²³
5	阮凯怡：@李绍康- 哈哈哈哈哈	阮凯怡：@李绍康- hahahaha
6	我想要两颗西 Yao：@懒羊羊羊羊羊羊洋不能胖嘟嘟 想到你🐼	我想要两颗西 Yao: @懒羊羊羊羊羊羊洋不能胖嘟嘟 It reminds me of you 🐼
7	叫我田森森：@_软绵绵的小笨蛋 这个适合你	叫我田森森：@_软绵绵的小笨蛋 This suits you
8	叫我田森森：哈哈哈哈哈我操@陈小花哈哈 这个好可怕，送你当头像 陈祖凯_：回复@叫我田森森:猥琐至极	叫我田森森：Hahahahahahaha Fuck @陈小花 Hahaha This one is horrible. For your profile pic 陈祖凯_：reply to @叫我田森森: Extremely obscene
9	饭饭饭饭哒：好色啊哈哈@Yang Yang：回复@饭饭菌的日常:你最喜欢	饭饭饭饭哒：So dirty. Haha @Yang Yang: reply to @饭饭菌的日常: You like it the most
10	好高兴君：@有头脑君 有头脑君：回复@好高兴君:简直没节操啊[挖鼻屎] 好高兴君：回复@有头脑君:好可爱哈哈哈哈哈快选个! 有头脑君：回复@好高兴君:第四个🤔 好高兴君：回复@有头脑君:那我要第三个哈哈哈哈哈 我去换~	好高兴君：@有头脑君 有头脑君：reply to @好高兴君: Blatant shameless [pick booger] ²⁴ 好高兴君：reply to @有头脑君: So cute hahahahahaha choose one, quick! 有头脑君：reply to @好高兴君: The fourth🤔 好高兴君：reply to @有头脑君: Then I'll choose the third hahahaha I'm gonna change my profile pic ~

Figure 14. Mao Tui's Weibo post and comments on 26 February, 2014

The majority thought it was very dirty (see comment 1 in figure 14), some commented that it was dirty yet cute (see comment 2 in figure 14), and a few directly said that it was super cute/*méng* (see comments 3 and 10 in figure 14). Though there are differences in attitudes, one thing for sure is that fans enthusiastically shared the post with their friends, as demonstrated by the number of reposts and @²⁵ in comments. An interesting thing is that when fans shared this Biaoqingbao with their friends, most of them leave no comments. Among those who did leave a

²³ In the process of editing texts, some Weibo users insert emojis by putting the emoji description in square brackets. But only on the condition that the description is the same as the default descriptions of Weibo emoji panel, will an emoji show when the text is published. In this case, “【cover face” is not typed correctly and fails to fetch the emoji of 🥰.

²⁴ In this case [pick booger] is manually inserted, but the description does not match the default one, and thus fails to present the emoji 🤔, whose description is [pick nose]. This emoji conveys contempt.

²⁵ In the comment section of a post, Weibo users can type @ and then choose the name of their Weibo friends, and the users mentioned in the @ function will be noticed of the post.

message, some said that it is dirty, with either verbal expressions, laughter, or shy/sly emojis (see comments 4, 5, 9, 10 in figure 14); some left comments like “it reminds me of you” or “this suits you” (see comments 6-7 in figure 14).

The conversations between fans and their friends in the comment section are also interesting. Some examples may serve as an illustration here. In comment 8 in figure 14, both the fan and the friend held a negative opinion towards the dirty Biaoqingbao, and the word “obscene” is used. In comment 9 in figure 14, when the post was forwarded with the comment “So dirty. Haha”, the receiver replied “You like it the most” to the sharer. As fans were sharing dirty Biaoqingbao with their friends with laughter, it is obvious that they do not dislike it. The reply “You like it the most” confirms the sharer’s positive attitude toward the dirty Biaoqingbao, but at the same time it conveys the information that being dirty and liking dirty content are not something one should be proud of, at least for the person who replied this. In comment 10 in figure 14, though the friend used “Blatant shameless” to describe the Biaoqingbao at the beginning, he/she revealed his/her true attitude through picking one as a profile picture, with a bashful emoji while doing so. Similar to the example in comment 9, the friend, though he liked the dirty Biaoqing, was aware of the negative moral or value judgement of the “Dicky” Biaoqingbao.

The three conversations indicate that there exists a negative moral judgement of Dicky Biaoqing among fans and their friends who have been forwarded the Biaoqing. There are a few who clearly delivered their negative opinion, and the majority did not directly indicate their attitude. However, their reposting, sharing with their friends, and commenting on the Biaoqing already revealed their liking for Dicky. Fans secretly like the dirty Biaoqing, but the majority do not admit it. To understand this shy reaction, it is necessary to turn to the moral judgement of sex and sex-related topics in Chinese society. Abstinence and stigmatization of sex in the history of Chinese culture, especially since Qing dynasty (1644-1912) till the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), is still deeply rooted in modern Chinese society (En, 2018; Yu, 2017). Though de-stigmatization of sex is in progress, Chinese people in general are still quite sensitive to public discussion of sex (*ibid.*). This social fact explains fans’ shy enthusiasm for Dicky Biaoqing. Though Dicky is an interlude in the Budding Pop Biaoqingbao, it highlights moral judgement of Biaoqing performed by fans in Biaoqingbao communities.

Though the key temperament of Budding Pop has changed several times, the defining and dominant feature, that is cute/*méng*, has always been firmly present. In the comments of fans, cuteness/*méng*-ness is the only overwhelming reason why fans follow Budding Pop (see comments 1-3 in figure 15). Because of their deep love for Budding Pop, fans would anxiously wait for new patches of Biaoqingbao (see comment 4 in figure 15), and they would generously spend money on merchandise and show off their collection (see comments 5 and 6 in figure 15).

1	抱走 好萌！😍😍😍	I'll take them. So cute!😍😍😍
2	好萌啊。看它们扭啊扭啊心情都不一样了呢。。嘿嘿。期待下一季！！	So cute. When I saw them dancing, my mood immediately improved. Looking forward to the next Biaoqingbao!!
3	第一次看到长草就觉得到了发现了新天地，在这么多没节操的表情文字爬满屏幕的时期，这种可爱又逗比的画风真的让人感觉亲切又刚好，不分年龄的萌，又很活泼，又很抓眼球	I found a new world after I saw Budding for the first time. In an age where screens are filled with vulgar Biaoqing and texts, this type of cute and funny style really feels warm and just right. Cute regardless of age, lively, and attractive
4	等了很久的新表情，终于来啦	It has been a long waiting for the new Biaoqingbao. Finally
5	早就买啦(●'ω'●)挂饰自己剁手买了抱枕基友吃土送我	Already bought (●'ω'●) The pendant I bought myself with all my savings, and the cushion my friend bought for me with all her savings
6	收到书啦😍😍😍	I received the picture book😍😍😍

Figure 15. Fans' comments on and actions to Budding Pop

Fans hold a high opinion of Mao Tui, but they respect her for different reasons. The majority of fans think she is cute and funny (see comments 1 and 2 in figure 16), and they like her because she creates Budding Pop Biaoqing (see comments 3 and 4 in figure 16). Some fans share interests with Mao Tui, which enhances their liking for her (see comment 5 in figure 16). A handful of fans think Mao Tui brings positive energy to them (see comment 6 in figure 16).

1	感觉 po 主萌萌哒	I think she is very <i>méng</i>
2	喜欢毛腿好久了，萌贱萌贱的！	I have been liking Mao Tui for quite long. She is bitchily <i>méng</i> !
3	腿腿真的是卯足劲的养团子呀，太爱你啦！高效腿腿，赛高！！比心❤️	Tui is really working hard to raise Pop. Love you so much! Efficient Tui is the best. Love you❤️
4	加油毛腿 多出表情和周边 躺等_(:□)∠)_	Cheers Mao Tui. Put forward more Biaoqing and merchandise. I'm waiting _(:□)∠)_
5	毛腿毛腿撒赖嘿哟~~~~也要继续喜欢凯源宝宝呐👉👉	Mao Tui I love you ~ ~ ~ ~ please also keep on liking Karry and Roy ²⁶ 👉👉
6	正能量☐	Positive energy ☐

Figure 16. Comments on Mao Tui

In her post on 8 September 2014, Mao Tui mentioned that she was a freshman, which triggered heated reaction from fans. For most fans the designer of their idol is supposed to be a senior experienced person. Consequently, many fans were surprised that they were following a person much younger than them (see comments 1-3 in figure 17), and some were amazed by her achievements (see comment 4 in figure 17). Based on the cute yet naughty characteristic of Budding Pop, some fans speculate the personality or character of its designer. When Mao Tui's age and social status were revealed, some fans got surprised by their wrong speculation (see comment 5 in figure 17), and some were happy to confirm their speculation (see comment 6 in figure 17). This small incident concerning the age and identity of Mao Tui reflects the difference

²⁶ Karry Wang and Roy Wang are members of TFBOYS, a Chinese boy band.

between traditional offline communities and new online communities. When online, people still make judgements, or assumptions, which match what they experience in offline communities. For instance, the majority of fans naturally assume Mao Tui, the designer of Budding Pop, to be an adult experienced in fine arts. This incident is special in the sense that there are not so many people as successful as Mao Tui in the Biaoqingbao industry. But it is also very revealing of the fact that netizens, at least netizens in this fan community, are still not so familiar or comfortable with new forms of community or social organization on the internet. Online communities seem to be virtual presentations of offline communities, but they are essentially different in the sense that online communities can be extremely light and defy the vast sharedness among members and the robust structures in offline communities.

1	原来我是阿姨🤔	It turns out I'm an aunty 🤔
2	泥竟然是小孩儿!!!	You are a kid!!!
3	🤔我竟然在关注一个在校大学生，还要是刚报道的那种。	🤔 I'm following a college student, and even a freshman.
4	天辣，才大一☐ 同是大一，怎么差这么多[泪流满面]	Oh my god, a freshman☐ I'm also a freshman, but there's such a big difference between us [full of tears]
5	诶你居然刚上大学！我还以为是变态大叔诶。。	You just started college! I thought you were a wired uncle..
6	毛腿这么可爱果然还是个孩子！	Mao Tui is so cute. No wonder she is a kid!
Figure 17. Comments concerning Mao Tui's identity		

Reasons for fans to reward and buy merchandise

According to the comments, fans reward and pay for merchandise because they love the cuteness of Budding Pop (see figure 18, comments 2, 4 in figure 19).

1	萌死了！立刻发了五元红包！继续加油呀	So <i>méng</i> ! I immediately rewarded ¥5! Work on
2	团团 给你赞赏小费啦！要加油出更多新表情哈！	Popling I already tipped you! Please create more new Biaoqing!
Figure 18. Fans' self-reported reasons for rewarding		

Comparison of the two fan communities

Three major differences are observed between the two communities presented above. First, the Budding Pop fan community came into being three year earlier than the Eggy community, and it has a much bigger fan base. The second difference is an inevitable outcome of the first one. As the two communities were initiated at a different time, they were faced with different affordances of social media in different times. That is why the Budding Pop community fledged on Weibo and the Eggy community developed from WeChat. The third difference is about the reasons for rewarding. In the Eggy fan community, followers often share why they reward and buy merchandise. While in the Budding Pop fan community, fans rarely tell why they reward or buy

merchandise. What they do the most is expressing how much they are attracted (see comments 1 and 2 in figure 19), and how happy they are to have the merchandise (see comments 3 and 4 in figure 19), or showing off their collection of merchandise (see comment 5²⁷ in figure 19). So far there is no clear explanation to the behavioral difference between the two fan communities.

In spite of the abovementioned differences, there are striking similarities between the two fan communities. Their development is indispensable of the affordances of social media, for instance the WeChat Biaoqing Open Platform, the comment function on WeChat and Weibo, online shopping support of Taobao, etc. Designers of both Biaoqingbao are active on multiple platforms, which boosts the diversity of the content underlying the communities and the fan base of the communities.

Fans in both communities reward Biaoqingbao and pay for merchandise for similar reasons. The comments of fans clearly demonstrate that the cute temperament of the Biaoqing figures is the strongest attraction for fans. In this sense, fans aspire to the characteristic of cuteness to show their aesthetic value, their taste. When fans use Biaoqing of a special taste, the taste is accredited to them. Consequently Biaoqing become resources for fans to perform a micro-hegemonic identity and to establish certain desired persona for themselves. Fans' admiration and aspiration for the cute temperament, good qualities and moral values of the Biaoqing figures are transformed into highly consequential activities. They not only enthusiastically use the Biaoqing, but also generously give reward and eagerly buy Biaoqing-related merchandise. Fans willingly spend money on resources for desired taste and micro-hegemonic identity (Ahuvia, 2005; Richins, 1994; Sirgy, 1982; Veblen, 2005). These economic activities make Biaoqingbao such a lucrative business that many designers have made Biaoqingbao their career. In this sense, we can say that Biaoqingbao has hatched a new type of economic practice which is native to and typical of 21st century online culture.

1	团子第一书, 说什么也要拥有🍡	The first picture book of Pop, I must have one 🍡
2	这也太可爱了叭! 我要拥有!!	So cute! I must have it!!
3	我的团子要到了	My Pop is being delivered
4	可爱的团子, 已下单啦😍😍	Cute Pop. I already placed an order 😍😍
5		

Figure 19. Fans' reactions to merchandise.

²⁷ In this comment, the fan uploaded the photo of her collection of Budding Pop dolls.

Conclusion

In this paper the fan communities of Eggy and Budding Pop are followed to find out why fans willingly and voluntarily open their wallets for Biaoqing and merchandise. The inspection of the communities shows that fans are not simply paying for the Biaoqingbao and their merchandise, but also for sharing their personal interests and pursuing the Biaoqing characteristics – e.g. cute, positive, lovely, excellent – they deem valuable. Such communities, without robust structures, are open to and undemanding on members, who are attached to the communities solely for the sake of fun, i.e. their fondness for the Biaoqing figures. In this sense, they are light online communities. In such light communities, people not only share information relevant to their idol Biaoqing figures, they also generously spend money on their idols. But when we look through this surface and dig deeper, we find that they are in fact paying for the ideal role model for themselves (for instance, diligent, positive, caring, etc.), for aspiration to ideal states for themselves (for instance, happy, cute, innocent, etc.), and for their taste of *méng*, which symbolizes their aesthetic judgement (Veblen, 2005). When fans use Biaoqing with the desired qualities, such qualities are accredited to them in this process. These Biaoqing are resources for fans to build a desired persona for themselves, and thus constitute their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 2011).

Members of the two fan communities are not the only ones who are after this taste. They are only part of a *méng*-taste-pursuing community. There are various social and cultural reasons behind the fervent pursuit of *méng*, including the need for dealing with stress in life, the aspiration for the expression of one's true self, the desire to demonstrate a distinctive identity, etc. (Zhu, 2014; Cao, 2014; Sun, 2013; Jiang & Ye, 2010). The pursuit of *méng* taste gradually develops into *méng* culture (Wen, 2016), and has become part of the main stream culture in Chinese society (Cao, 2014; Sun, 2013). There is no threshold to *méng* culture, and *méng* pursuers do not have shared backgrounds or space. In the light of these facts, *méng* pursuers, or *méng* culture members, actually form a light community.

To sum up, the two fan communities are part of a light community pursuing *méng*-culture in Chinese society. Members of this light community spend money on *méng* objects, which are resources for showcasing their desired taste and micro-hegemonic identity. The activities in this light community have heavy consequences. They hatch a new form of economic practice, and spawn a new form of cultural industry, in this case image IP industry and Biaoqing industry, both of which are typical of 21st century online culture.

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